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ABSTRACT

Having students adapt a play from a strongly dramatic short story through the composing process is a natural and powerful way to integrate the language arts. Using dramatic activities in the classroom naturally leads to two kinds of language activities: receptive (listening and observing), and active (discussing, reading, writing, and presenting). The short story "Thus I Refute Beelzy" by John Collier is most suitable for conversion into a one-act play. Before rewriting the story, students need to think about the several levels of meaning in the story and to be aware of elements of fantasy and the conflict between science (rationality) and intuition (irrationality). After reading the story, students can answer carefully structured questions in guided or small group discussions. Small groups then discuss proposed changes in the story, outline the new sequence of events, select students to take the parts of the characters, and role play the new scenes. The students are then ready to convert the narrative into drama. To help the students get started, the teacher might ask them to pay attention to considerations such as setting, changing description to dialogue, or turning various scenes into one setting. Once the students have finished their plays, they may present their finished products to an audience of other students. Having adapted a short story to a play, they will be ready and able to create their own dramatic or narrative works. (HTH)

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Converting Narrative into Drama:

Using the Composing Process to Integrate the Langu.ge A-ts

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Converting Narrative into Drama: Using the Composing Process to Integrate the Language Arts

Robert W. Blake

Having students adapt a play from a strongly dramatic short story through the composing process is a natural and powerful way to integrate the language arts. First of all, drama is an immediate and primary language art and is thus easily accessible to all students, especially those who have not had great success with academic reading and writing. Drama, furthermore, is immensely social, an activity for learning how to watch, listen, react, present, discuss, debate, and summarize. And when we use dramatic activities in the classroom, we find they lead naturally to other language activities of two general kinds: receptive activities, those including listening, observing, and beholding and active experiences, those including discussing, reading, writing, creating, and presenting.

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Adapting a Play from a Short Story

One way to integrate a number of language arts activities through the composing process is by having students convert a short story, in this particular instance, "Thus I Refute Beelzy" by John Collier, into a one act play. The story is most appropriate for our purposes. First, it is a neat little, fast moving horror tale in which a boy does in his domineering and cruel father through the aid of the character "Beelzy," whose name we take is the familiar form for "Beelzebub," the Greek appellation for the devil, which in turn is derived from the Hebrew "Ba'al ze bub," the ubiquitous and sinister "Lord of the Flies." Second, the story is supremely dramatic. It consists almost entirely of dialogue. There are only four characters, five, if we include Beelzy, whom we never see. The setting of the story is the house of a three-member family, and the action takes place during a very short time, moving from an opening expository scene through swift but deft character development to a rousing climax. In short, an ideal story to be adapted as a play.

Before engaging the students in rewriting this story as a play, we need to think about the several levels of meaning in the story and be aware of some crucial ideas. First off, on one level, the tale is a fantasy, in which the supposedly unreal occurs in the world of the actual. The story stands on its own as a rousing yarn, but, on another level, the conflict between the boy and his father may represent the conflict between science or rationality and intuition and irrationality. "Thus I Refute Beelzy," furthermore, is related to the study of the "occult," a word from the Latin occultus, originally meaning "to cover up or conceal," which includes supernatural agencies and the knowledge of

them like witchcraft, fortune-telling, ESP, astrology, tarot cards, alchemy, voodoo, spiritualism, black and white magic, palmistry, and graphology. All of these studies of the occult have one thing in common: the belief in hidden and mysterious powers.

There is no need to engage the students in an initial discussion of these matters, unless one or two have a background, and then our general information will assist us in helping them discover the richness of this apparently simple story. It's probably sufficient for their enjoyment of a horror story based upon diabolism to know that "Beelzy" appears to be the shortened form of the Greek name for the devil "Beelzebub." They should also know the meaning of the word refute, "to prove wrong," and be prepared to explain the irony in the inability of Pig Simon to "refute" Beelzy.

Analyzing the Story

After the students have read the story by themselves or have heard it read out loud in class, they need to come to terms with what happens in it. It is best to have carefully structured questions for guided discussion and to have the students talk about the narrative in small groups, possibly even pairing students, but having no more than four or five in any one group. The small group discussion is crucial because only in such groups will each student get feedback from others and in them will all students have experience in the give and take of listening, talking, reacting to feedback, and in adjusting ideas to that feedback. In other words, the students sharpen their communication skills by interacting with each other.

These are some questions we might have the student respond to, arranged simply by the categories of plot "What Happens in the Story?" character "Who Are the People?" and theme "What Are the Ideas" or "What Does It Mean?"

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE STORY?

1. At the opening of the story, Mrs. Carter rings the tea bell. What is "tea"? In what country might people have tea?

2. Small Simon spends most of his time in his retreat. Describe it. Tell what Simon does in his retreat.

3. What does Big Simon do to Small Simon when Small Simon refuses to say his friend Beelzy is make-believe?

4. What makes Big Simon so angry that he sends Small Simon to his room?

5. What happens to Big Simon at the end of the story?

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE?

1. What sort of man is Big Simon? What is his "scientific and modern way" of raising a child? Is his "way" really best for the boy? Why or why not?

2. What effect does Mr. Beelzy have upon Small Simon? What do you think will happen to Small Simon with his father gone?

WHAT ARE THE IDEAS?

1. This story suggests that there are mysterious, unexplainable forces that deeply affect people's lives. Discuss the possibility of the existence of such forces. If they exist, do they operate for good, for evil, or for both? Make a list of things which are good like love, families, hospitals, schools, and charities such as the Red Cross.

Now make a list of things which appear to be evil, like hate, war, robbery, and murder. How are they explained? By the actions of people, or by the influences of forces beyond the understanding of human beings?

Retelling the Story

After they have heard the story read to them or read it for themselves and discussed it in small groups, the students can go on to retell or reshape the story in their own words, thus giving them practice in developing their ability to retell narratives. Here are some guide questions for their retelling of the story.

> What would have happened if Mr. Carter had believed Small Simon and tried to help him escape from Beelzy? Make believe Big Simon knew who Beelzy was and tried to protect Small Simon from him. Retell the story. How would Mr. Carter act? How would he find out about Beelzy? What would happen when Mr. Carter met Beelzy? How would Mr. Carter get rid of Beelzy? What would happen to Small Simon?

Small groups could discuss such proposed changes in the story (or, of course, make up their own changes), outline the new sequence of events, select students to take the parts of the characters, and role play the new scenes. If they have read the story carefully--or have listened intently while it was read out loud--and discussed with other students and their teacher questions about the story, they will find such an activity a pleasant as well as profitable one.

Rewriting the Story as a Play

After this introductory work, the students are ready to convert narrative into drama, to create a play from a short story.

"This story would make a fine short play," we might tell our students as an introduction. "There is a lot of conversation, which makes good dialogue. The action takes place in one house, and it occurs within a short period of time. Here's an example at how you might start writing a play based upon 'Thus I Refute Beelzy.'"

This sample beginning shows the students how straightforward the process is when the original story is as essentially dramatic as Collier's is.

THUS I REFUTE BEELZY
by
John Collier
Adapted from the short story
by

Characters

MRS. CARTER
BETTY
SMALL SIMON
BIG SIMON (MR. CARTER)

The scene is the garden-room and tearoom of a tall Georgian house somewhere in England. The walls are cream-washed, a coarse blue net is in the windows, there are canvas-covered armchairs on the stone floor, and a reproduction of Van Gogh's Sunflowers is over the mantlepiece.

MRS. CARTER. There goes the tea bell. I hope Simon hears it. I'm worried about him.

BETTY. Oh, I see him now in the garden.

MRS. CARTER. Yes. That's been his retreat all summer. He stays out there for hours on end.

BETTY. He seems to be strutting up and down, making wild motions.

MRS. CARTER. I know. Playing his game. He won't play with the other children anymore. And if I go down there--the temper! And he comes in so tired out!

To help the students in an unobtrusive way with their dramaturgy, we might ask them to pay attention to considerations like these, which deal with setting, ~~turning~~ changing description ~~into~~ to dialogue, turning various scenes into one setting, and revealing how actors and actresses should say their lines.

a. How do I turn description into dialogue? We changed the story description of Small Simon in the garden into a conversation between Mrs. Carter and Betty.

b. How do I keep the action in one place? We moved the two women into the tearoom at the beginning of the play instead of having them walk from the drawing room to the tearoom.

c. How do I suggest to the reader or actor how the characters should talk?

First, we can use punctuation marks to show emphasis and pitch. When Mrs. Carter says "And if I go there--the temper! And he comes in so tired out!" we know that the exclamation marks mean that she is upset and that the pitch of her voice is higher than normal.

Or, we can describe how a person speaks his lines, sometimes using the direct words of the author. In this example, we have used John Collier's directions for how he wished his characters to say their lines.

MR..CARTER Learn from experience, Small Simon. Tomorrow, do something amusing, and you will not be bored. I want him to learn from experience, Betty. This is my way, the new way.

SMALL SIMON. (Small Simon speaks like an old, tired man, as little boys so often do.) I have learned.

The students would profit at this stage from working in small groups of from two to three students, discussing with each other in a spontaneous manner rather subtle but crucial matters like appropriateness of setting, the necessity of action on and off stage, and the delivery of lines.

For those students who want to create an original play from the story, they should be encouraged to do so with directions like these:

> You may wish to write a play different from the original story, one based on the version which you re-told, with Mr. Carter understanding Small Simon and protecting him from Beelzy. You will need to create new scenes to reflect your new telling of the story.

Once the students have finished their plays, they may present their finished products to an audience of other students. Obviously, the time has been well spent with their sharpening of various communication skills such as reading, writing, discussing, revising, editing, and producing a play and then with listening, witnessing, and reacting to the various versions of the adaptions.

Creating Original Fantasies: Stories or Plays

Once the students have moved through the process of adapting a play from someone else's short story, they are ready and able to create their

own fantasies, either dramatic or narrative. The following introductory activity is aimed at helping them choose a commonplace situation close to their experiences, with just a hint of the macabre or occult, and to encourage them to write an original fantasy. They have seen enough tales of the supernatural in the movies or on TV or read them in stories and in comics to know the genre. For those students who need models before they can proceed, they can choose either of the sample beginnings to finish. Those who are more secure will no doubt create their own fresh fantasies.

We give them these directions and two sample beginnings to finish.

Now you may wish to create your own fantasy. Where will it happen? Who will be the people? What will happen to them?

The fantasy can take place right around where you live. And the people can be just like those that you know very well. The best fantasies are often about commonplace people, whose actions ~~that~~ just can't be explained by reason and logic. Here are a few ideas to start you off.

a. Suppose you must pass by a fierce German Shepherd dog on your way home after school and sometimes just before dark after you have been to the neighborhood store. One night, the dog scares you so much that you say out loud, "I wish that dog were dead!"

On your way home, you meet a black cat with strange yellow eyes that seem to glow in the dark. You take the cat in and feed it. The next night you must go to the store. You bring the cat. When you are coming home, it is almost dark. The dog rushes out at you. Backing away, you fall down. The dog leaps at you.

Then you hear a screech, and a tall black creature with glowing yellow eyes comes between you and the dog.

What happens next? Write your fantasy.

b. A new boy moves into your neighborhood and is in your class at school. He is very quiet, and his eyes are wide as if he is staring at something unusual all of the time. But you and he become friends.

One day he says that there will be a grass fire in the lot behind your house that afternoon. You laugh at him, but the grass catches fire. Fire engines come to put it out.

The next day he says that there will be a fire alarm in school and that the firemen will find a blaze in the cafeteria kitchen. You listen but don't say anything. Sure enough, there is a fire at school the next day. It has started in the kitchen among some papers and boxes.

A few days later your friend tells you that one of the houses in your neighborhood will catch fire and burn. And someone may get hurt or die! Whose house is it, you ask. He doesn't know, but it is painted green with black shutters. Your house is green with black shutters.

What happens next? Write your fantasy.

The students work by themselves on their fantasies but then read them out loud to other students in small groups. After they have revised their stories on the basis of reactions by the other students, they can read them out loud or act them out before the entire class.

Learning Communication Skills by Converting Narrative into Drama

By following through these language arts activities for adapting a play from a short story through the composing process, the students have learned a considerable amount about language arts.

First, they have practiced several communication skills. They have read or listened to a strongly dramatic short story read out loud and analyzed key notions of fiction centered on plot, characters, and themes. They have retold and re-created the story in their own words. They have converted the story into a one act play. They have used models to write new fantasies or to create entirely original ones. They have started the unit with the more easily accessible skills of listening, speaking, and discussing and have moved on to the more difficult skills of reading, writing, and revising.

Second, the students have followed through the stages in the composing process of gathering specific details, examples, and ideas, of drafting, of getting feedback, and then of further revising until the material has a certain polished form. Only by following this process again and again, will students learn how to revise what they say and write on the basis of feedback from other people, learn how to analyze audiences, relate what they say and write on the basis of this analysis, and quite simply, learn through interaction how to get the business of the world done.

And finally, they have directly and naturally participated in language activities more ancient than history, as old as human beings, and as basic to their welfare as breathing: creating and beholding stories and plays.